

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE E-67WASHINGTON POST
27 April 1985

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Spy Satellite Panel's Surprise Decision

When a U.S. spy satellite reported an apparent nuclear explosion in the ocean off South Africa in September 1979, President Jimmy Carter appointed a panel of distinguished scientists to determine exactly what triggered the satellite's signal.

After studying the matter for several months—including evidence from the CIA and the Defense Department—the panel of scientists concluded that certain discrepancies in the satellite's signal probably were caused not by an "Earth" event, such as a nuclear blast, but by a "space" event, possibly a collision with a small meteoroid.

How did the scientists reach this surprising decision, which contradicted evidence that the satellite had, in fact, accurately reported a nuclear test?

Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.) and the Washington Office on Africa, a public-interest group, think the White House panel might have been influenced by political considerations. That, at any rate, is the view expressed in a draft report prepared by researchers for Conyers and the Washington Office on Africa. "The report certainly raises interesting questions," Conyers told our associate Vicki Warren. "But I cannot second-guess the Carter White House on what exactly the political considerations were."

The case for political meddling goes something like this:

A presidential election year was coming up. Israel was suspected as South Africa's partner in development of a nuclear weapon; if they indeed

had exploded a bomb, by law U.S. military aid to Israel would have to cease. That would have been political dynamite.

Furthermore, Carter did not want to offend the South Africans to the point of scuttling his efforts to bring about a sort of southern Africa "Camp David" agreement, which would have been a foreign policy triumph for the president.

Frank Press, who was Carter's science adviser, discounts the suggestion of political pressure. "I don't remember any political considerations at the time," he said.

The Conyers-Washington Office on Africa draft report makes much of the fact that a Navy Research Laboratory study, which was performed at the time and concluded that there had been a nuclear explosion, was "suppressed" by the White House and apparently disregarded by the scientific panel.

Press said the White House panel had been briefed by the Navy researchers but received only "preliminary" information. As for the Conyers-Washington Office on Africa draft report's criticism of a lengthy delay in the release of the White House panel's report, Press said that the information was under review for several months.

Actually, the White House panel's conclusion was judiciously ambiguous. It said: "Although we cannot rule out the possibility that this [satellite] signal was of nuclear origin, the panel considers it more likely that the signal was of one of the 'zoo' events [unexplained anomalous signals obtained from Vela satellites], possibly a consequence of the impact of a small meteoroid on the satellite."